

## let me learn how to speak by addandsubtract

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**Summary:**

It's summer, and Mike is finally legal to drink. He and El are at the cabin she stole from Hop, way back when, drinking whiskey lemonades on the tiny front steps.

## let me learn how to speak

### Author's Note:

so here's more of this future fic universe. i don't think you necessarily have to have read the first part to understand this one, but it was written with the first in mind. enjoy!

someday mike wheeler will let himself express a feeling, probably.

It's summer, and Mike is finally legal to drink. He and El are at the cabin she stole from Hop, way back when, drinking whiskey lemonades on the tiny front steps. Mike has his head on her shoulder, easy, and she's petting his hair.

"Do you get drunk without me?" he asks. He sounds petulant. He's the one that left Hawkins, but sometimes he still feels like he's being left behind.

"No, I wait and pine for you," El says, and taps his cheek with her fingers. Her skin is always a little colder than he expects.

"El," he says. She's not as quiet as she was when she was a kid, but she still doesn't explain herself much. He's curious.

"Steve and I hang out, sometimes. Will too. Outside of the monster stuff," she says. "Can you imagine hanging out with Steve and not drinking?"

Mike hums. He can. It's just over a year since Steve took Mike home for the first time, and neither of them was drunk then. But El knows all about that. She was the first person he told. He still hasn't told Nance, not that he thinks she would care. Although – maybe she would, given her and Steve.

"You like him, don't you," Mike says. "Steve, I mean."

El's fingers scratch over his scalp, the feeling of it so decadent, and she finishes off her glass before reaching over and pouring herself

another from the pitcher beside her. “Yes,” she says. “He doesn’t say one thing and mean another. He’s not confusing, you know?”

Mike finds him pretty confusing, but maybe that’s just because whenever they’re left to their own devices, mostly they fuck. Steve hasn’t been seeing anyone else, as far as Mike can tell, but they haven’t talked about that. Steve doesn’t call him when he’s at school and Mike doesn’t ask after Steve – much – when he’s away.

He’ll be gone for at least three more years, if he gets into medical school, and that’s only if he can find a way to do his residency back in Hawkins.

“He’s pretty straightforward, yeah,” Mike says. “Like Hop.”

“He’s less sad than Hop,” El says.

“Maybe.” Mike turns his head so that he can look at her face, her wide eyes and serious, sensitive mouth. He loves her with so much of him, just not in the way everyone wants him to. “What about you?”

“Am I less sad than Hop?” El laughs. “Most days. Like right now.”

“Me too,” Mike says. “Thanks for covering for me, earlier.”

“They’re going to think we’re screwing again if you keep using me as an excuse,” she says, mild, but her mouth twitches up in the corner. She likes trouble. Mike knows how mischievous she can be. Sometimes Mike is shocked by how different she looks, her red lipstick and her hair down to her shoulders, bangs pinned back in a wave, but Mike still knows her better than anyone. At least, he thinks he still does.

“People are going to think we’re screwing until we die,” Mike says. “I’m pretty sure Steve wonders if we’re screwing.”

“He does not,” El says. “I think he just wishes you had a less convenient excuse. So you’d tell the truth.”

“I don’t live here,” Mike says. “I’m not the one who would have to deal with that fallout.”

“Maybe,” El says. “Anyway, you like him.”

It’s stupid, but Mike does. There’s just something about him. His wide mouth, maybe. His foolhardiness. Mike says, “He’s okay.” El laughs at him.

Steve wakes him up at 3AM, climbing in the window like he used to do with Nance.

His hand is firm on Mike’s arm, shaking him awake, and his smile is crooked when Mike opens his eyes. For a moment, Mike thinks Steve will kiss him, that that’s what this is, the same as it was with Nance, but then Steve says, “Hey, we need you,” and Mike knows it’s not that.

Mike usually goes to Steve’s, anyway. Less likely they’ll get caught.

“What happened?” Mike says, sitting up. He’s not wearing a shirt, and Steve’s eyes track over his chest before they flick back up to his face.

“El nearly got eaten by an bulette,” Steve says. They’ve never grown out of giving the aberrations from the Upside Down Dungeons and Dragons names, and the bulettes tunnel just like in the monster manual, erupting out of the ground to spread their mouths open, thick with teeth. “She ripped it apart, and she’s fine, but I was wondering if you’d be willing to give her a few stitches on short notice.”

They’ve had to start avoiding the hospitals, given how many scrapes they’ve all been in. Mike slides out of bed and pulls on some clothes. He can feel Steve watching him, but it’s not unpleasant.

“Did it die?” Mike asks.

“It definitely did,” Steve says. “Do you wanna look at the body?”

“After,” Mike says. He hasn’t seen a bulette yet. He wants to compare it to the rest of the Upside Down’s surprises. “Did you drive?”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “I’ll take you to her.” Steve turns to climb back out the window, and then seems to think better of it, swiveling back and kissing Mike on the cheek. It’s so Steve – weird and weirdly sweet – that Mike just follows him out onto the overhang roof, down the tree, and into the car. They’re pros at this now.

Steve opens Mike’s door for him, and Mike glances back at the house when they pull out – his parents aren’t awful people, they just would rather pretend that the things they don’t understand aren’t happening. Mike thinks about how much easier it would be just to stay with Steve, or with El, instead of going home to them without Nance around to take some of the pressure off.

Maybe next summer. Maybe if he’s not too much of a wuss to ask.

El is sitting on the couch, Hop next to her looking like – well, like a worried dad. Her arm is still bleeding sluggishly, but Mike has seen worse. Steve’s got worse scars, for sure. Hop makes as if to stand, and El grabs his arm, pulling him back down.

“Ignore him,” El says. “Here.” She hands him the medical kit. There’s a smudge of blood underneath her nose. He’s still a pre-med undergrad student, and shouldn’t be trusted with this stuff, except that he trained as an EMT and he’s a really good pupil. He took up embroidery for a while, too, just to make sure he was comfortable with a needle. El doesn’t complain, only tenses a few time while he disinfects and puts the stitches in.

“I don’t think these will dissolve,” Mike says, looking at the packaging. “I’ll check on them in a few days, okay?”

“Sure,” El says, and then, because she knows that Mike is about to ask, “I didn’t go out without you on purpose. It was a surprise.”

Mike feels his mouth twist. She’s not lying, but he still hates it when they leave him out.

El rolls her eyes. “Steve wasn’t even there. I called him after. Right Steve?”

Steve, who has been standing in the doorway watching, blinks, and then shakes his head. "Leave me out of this. I know better than to get between you two when you're bickering."

"Bed, El," Hop says. "I don't care how okay you feel, you ripped that thing open with your mind, and that means it's time for bed."

El rolls her eyes, and looks like she might protest, so Mike stands. "Steve is gonna take me to see the body anyway," he says. "We can finish this tomorrow."

Hop snorts. "You kids are all so fucking weird," he says, like El is normal. Like any of them could possibly be normal, at this point.

"Guilty," Steve says. "Shall we?"

Mike watches out the window while Steve drives. The roads get narrower the further they get into the woods, until Steve pulls over and turns the car off. They're getting close to El's little house.

"And now we walk," Steve says, with a flourish.

"Was it coming for El? Where she lives?"

Steve shrugs. "She was out walking, I think. Maybe she felt something."

"Does she do that a lot?" Mike asks. It feels stupid that he wouldn't know, but he doesn't. He hates it.

Steve looks at his face, and seems to read some of that on it. He nudges Mike with his shoulder. "When she can't sleep, so not that much, I guess. Sometimes she'll call me, sometimes she'll call Will. I think it probably depends on whether she wants to be distracted or get some shit done."

Mike nods. That seems about right. Will is - well, Will is Will. He's got a spine made of iron. Sometimes Mike thinks about what Will would have been like without the Upside Down, but it's impossible to imagine.

El has more power to push and pull and change, but Will is the only one of them that can accurately *see* the Upside Down. It still calls to him sometimes, Mike thinks, though Will has never admitted to it.

“How far out is the body?” Mike asks, and hears Steve snort.

“Maybe half a mile. You’ll know when you see the clearing.”

Mike does, though it’s mostly a clearing because El toppled all of the trees in a six-foot radius. There’s also the gaping hole in the ground where the bulette pushed up.

The monster itself is in two parts - a top and bottom half - the edges ragged like it was ripped open.

“It was,” Steve says, when he mentions it. “You know El when she’s hurt or scared or angry.”

“Yeah,” Mike says. He brought his kit with him, just in case. It’s not much - a couple of scalpels, a few petri dishes, some baggies for other sorts of samples. Usually the tissue dissolves before he can get a good look at it, so he slices open the chest cavity. Its insides are familiar but still don’t make much sense - three knots connected with corded tissue, like what might be hearts, but no lungs to speak of. It has ribs, at least, though he’s not sure what they’re protecting, and blood, though it’s viscous and darker than any animal Mike has otherwise dissected. Just like the rest of the monstrosities from the Upside Down. The bottom half doesn’t have intestines or a stomach, instead it has a liquid-filled sac and two more of those knots, both of which looks partially inflated. Mike has no idea how it digests what it eats.

When Mike looks up, he realizes that Steve has a disposable camera, and is snapping pictures of the scene.

“How are you gonna get these pictures developed?” Mike asks. “Some lab tech will probably find the unfurling mouth and hundreds of teeth kind of noticeable. And that fact that it’s in two pieces.”

Steve rolls his eyes. “I’ll develop them, genius. I got one of the techs to teach me this spring. They let me use the photo lab in the police station if it’s late and they don’t need it.”

“Oh,” Mike says. “Huh.”

“I figured it would be easier if you had pictures,” Steve says, with a twist in his mouth. “Since we have to burn the body.”

“Thanks,” Mike says, and finds that the words sound sincere. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Duh,” Steve says, but his face is a little red, and he smiles. “Go on, I can wait for you to finish your weird science shit.”

Part of Mike wonders if Steve is taking pictures of him, too, or just the insides of the bulette. Maybe he wants one to keep. Maybe he’s soft like that.

Mike can’t say how he’d feel if that were the case.

Mike cuts open one of the inflated knots, and it feels like muscle, oozes more of that viscous blood, like this creature has interchangeable hearts, or organs that expand or contract when needed. The sac is filled with eggs.

“Jesus,” Mike says. “I wonder if they’re fertilized.”

“I hope not,” Steve says. “They’ll all burn anyway.”

“Good,” Mike says. He cuts far enough to expose the spine, though the vertebrae are larger than he’d expect for the size. Its huge, clawed feet are curved like a mole’s. He isn’t really any closer to understanding what keeps them alive, but the bulettes are similar enough to the demogorgons that they’re both obviously from the same evolutionary track. Finally, he stands and pulls off his gloves inside-out, stuffing them into his kit with the tissue samples that will likely degrade by the morning.

He steps back to let Steve do the burning - he’s done enough of it that Mike would get in the way if he tried to help. Steve is confident with the gasoline he has stashed in the trunk of his car, and careful not to let the fire spread beyond the body.

After, they watch it burn for a while. It’s like a campfire, if you ignore the misshapen husk in the middle. The air smells like singed



meat, but like the meat is slightly off. Rotten. Steve keeps sneaking looks at Mike.

“Wanna come home with me?” Steve asks, eventually.

“My parents will notice if I’m not there when they wake up,” Mike says, which is, to be honest, a pretty weak excuse. His parents should start getting used to the fact that he’s an adult.

“I can wake you up early, if you wanted to sneak back in,” Steve says. His smile is crooked and hopeful, the best kind of smile, and he reaches forward to rub his thumb over Mike’s cheek. “C’mon.”

Mike knows that if he goes, he’s not going to bother to sneak home. He’ll stay wrapped up in Steve, in Steve’s bed, until the sunshine forces him awake. His parents will ask where he went, and he’ll give them a vague excuse, maybe use El’s emergency as a reason, say he slept on Hop’s couch, after. Hop might even lie for him if his parents bother to check, which they won’t.

They don’t even really know he’s friends with Steve. Mike would like to keep it that way, at least for now. He’s making life more complicated than it needs to be, but he doesn’t exactly know how to stop himself. There are things that he wants. He should be allowed to want them.

“Yeah, okay,” Mike says, and when Steve pulls him in for a kiss, he doesn’t resist. Steve took pictures of the dead monster so that he could have them. Steve snuck into his room, Mike’s room, not Nance’s, and he’s inviting Mike home for the third time this week. Mike could start to get comfortable. He shouldn’t, but he could.

“I’ll set an early alarm,” Steve says. “No one will even know you left.”

Mike doubts it, but that’s okay. He weighed it. He says, “C’mon, take me home.”